
Plato, epistemology, politics and social media: a glimpse

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A couple millennia ago, philosopher Plato wrote the allegory of the cave. The essence of the allegory is that whenever we act like passive information receptors without applying any kind of critical eye to such information, we end up believing nothing but what others want us to believe in order to make us predictable animals and finally controlling our actions. What Plato said more than 2000 years ago is still valid today in the context of social media communication and there is a simple explanation for that. Our knowledge and beliefs are based mostly upon our experience (what we see, hear, smell, touch, etc.), including the assimilation of other beliefs like the moral principles our parents interiorize in us about what is good or bad. But our experience is really poor. Every one of our senses is bound to a limited range of perception, so if we are eating a cheeseburger inside a restaurant we have no experience at all about what is going on around the corner for there are many physical obstacles between us and what is happening over there. The situation gets worse if we have some extra-limitations like myopia, deafness, and so on.

Now consider this analogous situation. If we are in Honolulu and try to know what is happening in Moscow or New York, we face a real problem because we are not able at all to experience by ourselves what is happening there. However, we are not condemned to total ignorance about that, for one of the most distinctive characteristic of human beings is our power to communicate, so always has existed some mean to communicate people in one *place x*, what is happening in another *place y*. In the ancient world for instance existed *messengers* like the famous Philippides who ran to Athens to announce the victory of *Marathon* and after he could do it fell dead. Some time after came Guttenberg and his printing press and thanks to him short time after appeared other means of communication like books, newspapers and magazines. In the XX century the media was

dominated by the electric means of communication like telegraph and radio, but none of these had the influence TV achieved during the post war era until now with the appearance of Internet and social media.

The most important feature of the media from Philipides to Facebook is that they represent extensions of our perception organs that allow us to experience things that our spatiotemporal situation would not allow as a first-hand experience. But media has never been just a trail where the information flows immaculately, for its narrative necessarily reflects some of the most basic ideals that arise in the culture it develops, that mean that the basic paradigms about how things are but also about how they must be, are reflected in the media as an image in a mirror. That was the way Achilles became the model of a brave man transmitted by the Iliad to the Greeks or how did we learn the ten commandments as norms of action transmitted by the Bible. In the same way media also reflects and reaffirms the fears, hates and some theories in the prevalent culture.

All these paradigms or models finally serves to instruct other people of the same culture and thus merge society and build an identity about what it means to be a Greek or a Christian basically the same way as once Hollywood modeled what was to be a man and a woman through the classic movies of Marlon Brando and Marylin Monroe. The same is true for the current social media, but this situation is amplified by the fact that unlike former media, they are ubiquitous. We do not have even to make any kind of effort to get the information for we are permanently receiving it in every one of our devices whether we are in our home, in the work, in the school, driving or walking on the street, there will always be a device transmitting to us in HD and real time the narratives of our culture about how things are and how they must be.

The influence media exerts over individuals poses many risks, especially when these individuals have a naïf approach to the information presented in them. Plato was aware of this and start a quarrel with poets because their products like Homer's Iliad were the media of his time. As we have mention poets spread the ideals of their culture through their stories and plays, but also were accused by philosophers like Plato and Xenophanes of spread misconceptions and falsehood as well as manipulate the beliefs of the people through their rhetoric. In the book X of his Republic Plato argues that they *maim the thought of those who hear*

them, because they do not seek the truth, but only repeat and reaffirm popular beliefs most of which lack of justification. Plato opposes in his quarrel the notions of **doxa** and **episteme**, *doxa* being nothing but an opinion raised who-knows-where-and-how versus *episteme* which is in the core of our modern concept of science, that is a true and justified belief that has a clear origin in any kind of evidence.

The above mentioned just show us how media has always been under scrutiny since the age in which it was only a collection of oral stories. This happens to be because brilliant thinkers like Plato have always been aware of its influence in the shaping of societies. Unfortunately, this aware is not a constant and we, as users and consumers tend to underestimate this feature mainly because media is always trying to present itself with neutrality and showing facts with no further intensions (and we believe it!). It is true that much of the narrative of the media is the result of an unconscious reflection of the paradigms of the society they depict, but it is also true that its ability to reach massive audiences and influence them through some well-known rhetoric methods have never been wasted by political propaganda as well as publicity, and this certainly won't be the case in the issue of social media.

So, what we need to do is not to get rid of social media just as Plato wanted to get rid of poets in his ideal Republic, for this is not a realistic and certainly not a democratic solution. The only way we can avoid the negative effects of mass media is education about the use and misuse of information and the traps of the rhetoric and fallacies. This does not mean more regulations and laws as conservative narrow-minded mentality has been trying somewhere to solve the problem but making instead people free to think by themselves and reach valid conclusions about the veracity of the information they consume.

Even though social media is controlled by huge companies with huge politics, there is a feature of the new media that was never seen before: the nanoscopic influence of the user. Never in the history before the user was able to interact with other users as he can do it through the tools of the web 2.0. This influence could be tiny when we consider it in the individual scale but has a tremendous potential of altering the semantic of a message at a group scale, that is why social bots were invented and are activated whenever the situation warrants it. However, it

is usual that citizens remain ignorant about this power and lack the abilities and wisdom needed to use it, but just consider how an idiotic video like the *kiki* or any other “challenge” goes viral: simply by the sum of likes that can reach millions in a very short time. A user alone is nothing, but the sum of users can be an issue.

According to data Facebook already has 2.3 billion of users worldwide, and half of the adults Americans get news from this social network, so we can see the degree of audience it has and the opportunities this implies for the markets, politicians and many other salesmen of beliefs. Without proper education in the use and misuse of information in the social media we can expect in the future similar phenomena to those showed when Orson Welles presented the radio drama of the war of the worlds with everybody entering in panic as the fantastic narration was taken place. Unfortunately, all evidence seems to show that we are not doing better than them when we approach to some mythologies raised in the social media.

So far, we are just in the beginning of the social media studies. It is yet too early to specify all the advantages and disadvantages they will bring and the potential they have in the field of education and culture. However, we need to be as aware as Plato did when we consider the fact that social media can influence people in many ways, misleading and even spreading lies and evident misconceptions and prejudices.

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